

Rail Plant Association Update

RPA Acting-Chairman Darren Matthews reports on the current initiatives of the association for road/rail plant owners.

Hello RPA update readers and welcome. Back in autumn 2021 we did something a little different. We published a Q&A session in the hope of sharing some history of the RPA and what we can do, or cannot do, for our members. For me, your humble narrator, it was an enlightening article because I learnt many things about our little group, its connection to the Construction Plant Association (CPA) and who its founder members and chairpersons were.

Around the time I was writing that article, *Rail Infrastructure* kindly sent me copies of some very early articles for research. They were all written by the chairperson of the time Andy Webb who, amazingly, celebrated 50 years in business last summer. A truly incredible achievement, Andy. Anyway, back on point; I found those early articles really interesting, and I thought we would spend a moment reflecting on them.

Early Rail Infrastructure articles

There really is something captivating when reading history. Our little bit of storytelling today will summarise Andy Webb's articles from Issue Nos: 16 to 24 of the magazine. To put that in context, this magazine is Issue No: 146 (March/April 2022), so we are back-tracking to the early-2000s for those of you who were trying to do the maths.



Collective Mark

What can I say, researching the RPA's history has been an education. I may be the acting chair for the RPA, but my fellow committee members are a font of railway knowledge to me, with vastly more railway experience. My background involved 16 years of mining coal before joining the railways in 2003. As it happens, David Simmons, our chairperson, was my first railway employer, and I am sincerely grateful to him and his late brother Steve for helping me adjust my career path.

Did you know the RPA had its own industry-recognised Supplier Audit Protocol? Andy wrote about it in Issue No: 16 and, in an article I wrote last year, I was heavily defending that audit protocol because it was produced and undertaken by technical experts in plant. Moreover, at the time, Railtrack (aka Network Rail) was pressing for the implementation of a new supplier audit protocol for all suppliers called Link-up. As it turned out, harmony was restored via a collaborative involvement of the RPA, M&EE Networking Group and the new Link-up team in the creation of an audit protocol.

Issue No: 17 followed on with the Link-up theme and added the importance of having plant-skilled auditors with knowledge in plant maintenance, use and hire. Interestingly, the article also alluded to the development of training packages in development by the RPA for plant operators and fitters. As we know, the plant operator competence later became a City and Guilds (CITB) qualification (issuing operators with their CTA card of competence), then operator competence was taken in-house by Network Rail under its Sentinel Scheme. But the fitter competence and assessment materials remain firmly within the RPA.

The next few articles steered towards the challenges faced from Vehicle Acceptance Body (VAB) work. These bodies are responsible for the detailed scrutiny of new on-track plant and the issue of the 'Certificate of Engineering Acceptance' (oddly shortened to EAC) for each item of on-track plant passing its checks. Of course, those awarding bodies and awarded certificates are still a requirement today, albeit with a slight name change (and many laborious hours for businesses having to conduct changes to their management system documents) from VAB to PAB (Plant Assessment Body), and from EAC to ECC (Engineering Conformance Certificate).

At the time, the challenges faced by plant owners followed several VABs having their licences revoked. Therefore, leaving a bottleneck for plant owners wanting to get their plant certified and on-hire to their customers. The knock-on effect of reducing VABs led to a significant increase of charges for their services, coupled with a delay to the plant owner who could not generate any revenue

from hiring their newly procured plant because it was awaiting engineering certification.

In the end, it led to the release of new items of on-track plant under a 'temporary' EAC. Apparently, this was permitted under the old Railway Group Standard GM/RT 1300. I have not heard of that ever happening under RIS-1530-PLT (which replaced GM/RT 1300 in April 2006). In addition, a meeting held between Railtrack, the M&EE Group, the RPA and VABs led to some positive outcomes such as a review to see if the vast number of railway standards, designed primarily for rolling stock, were relevant to on-track plant. It sounds like we have a luxury nowadays where most of what we need as plant providers can be sourced from one Infrastructure Plant Manual.

Time for reflection

Plant-owning companies still feel the same frustrations from 'hold-ups' when introducing new plant. Albeit, not due to lack of certifying bodies, but more due to the complexity of the plant being built, a matured RIS-1530-PLT standard and possibly due to Network Rail's Product Approval process. The cost, however, has increased considerably. In GM/RT 1300 days, the scrutiny process was only for the introduction of new plant. Post-2006 under RIS-1530-PLT, engineering scrutiny now takes place every seven years. And yes, it can be very costly, so can we please have more midweek shifts, Mr. Network Rail?

On the whole, I thoroughly enjoy working on the railway with on-track plant. Of course, there are ongoing issues, but they are softened by the pleasure of working with like-minded professionals who love plant, railways and are seeking new innovation for our industry.

In previous articles, we discussed how on-track plant safety has improved over the years through the introduction of POS, Rail PPS and learning from past accidents. Before I get off the train, here is a reminder why history helps pave the way for safety. During one of our recent RPA meetings, Paul Helks, A.P. Webb Plant Hire, made a profound point. He said: 'We have come a long way since the fatal accident at Tebay in 2004. Let us not forget that event nor any others that have caused harm to people. Let us not forget to learn from mistakes made. Let us not forget to teach all new workers joining our railway family about these terrible events. Let us not forget.....'



The Tebay memorial listing the four fatally injured railway workers. Photograph: RMT.